

Salt
Isaiah 58:1-9; Matthew 5:13-20
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You may have noticed that today's Gospel text from the Gospel of Matthew is some of the most familiar words in the bible, and that is because today's text is a part of teaching by Jesus commonly referred to as "*The Sermon on the Mount.*" Arguably one of the best sermons ever preached and arguably the heartbeat of Christian Belief. If I'm being honest, I feel intimidated to preach on this text because I see Jesus' words and instructions to be so profound and it feels uncomfortable to try and expound on his sermon.

The sermon on the mount is recorded in the Gospel of Matthew chapters 5-7 and it is basically when Jesus lays out why he is here and what his mission statement is for his ministry and the kingdom he has come to establish. The Sermon on the Mount is not Jesus teaching about things from the past, but is rather his opening statements. One might see the Sermon on the Mount as Jesus Blueprint for God's alternative kingdom, a kingdom that is different than the kingdoms of this world - in Jesus sermon we learn that in God's Kingdom there is

- Justice for all people
- transformed social relationships
- Moral responsibility
- and shared and accessible resources for all

We also learn in the Sermon on the Mount that

- There are no privileged members – anyone, including the poor and marginalized, are welcomed
- Jesus is not here to do away with the Torah/ law, but rather is here to fulfill the law
- He is here to transform hearts so that people can love one another fully.
- God's Kingdom is here right now, we still live in this world, but we follow different rules - we follow the rules of the upside-down kingdom.

To fill in the context we need to go back one chapter and look at Matthew Chapter 4 where we witness Jesus beginning his earthly ministry - in chapter 4 Jesus calls his first followers and disciples. He does not go about calling the best and the brightest to begin this new ministry. Rather he finds folks who are often overlooked by society; he calls fishermen, day laborers, the poor, the meek, the unimportant. The ones who would be easiest to overlook and ignore. These are the people whom Jesus begins his ministry with.

The last verses of chapter 4 says “Jesus fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them. Great crowds began to follow him.

Then we turn to chapter five which begins with, “When Jesus saw the crowds, (meaning when he saw the demoniacs and epileptics and people in pain) he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, he began to speak, and taught them, saying 9 Blessings, commonly referred to as The Beatitudes. The Beatitudes are Blessings said over people who are not typically seen as blessed, the poor, those who mourn, the meek, the hungry and thirsty, the persecuted.

Stanley Hauerhous, a renowned Theologian states about the Beatitudes: “Too often these characteristics of the blessings have in Christian history been turned into ideals of virtue that we strive to attain; when we do that we turn them into formulas that help us gain status and favor with God, which is the opposite of what God is trying to say. Rather they are descriptions of kinds of people whom Jesus first brought to the kingdom of God. Nowhere does Jesus tells us to try to be poor in spirit, or try to get yourself persecuted. He simply announces the great surprise that these people who are not significant or honored in their society are precisely the one who have received the honor to be the first who are called into God’s kingdom.

In other words Jesus isn’t teaching the sick and poor what they should try and become; he was telling them you are blessed and you are the salt of the earth and you are the light of the world. You don’t have to change anything Jesus is saying “You just are blessed as members of my kingdom.”

I need to point out that English does not do a great job of translating the word “you” here. Jesus is using the plural form of you, so It’s more like Jesus is saying y’all are blessed, Y’all are the salt of the earth, Y’all are the light of the world.

The metaphor of being the salt of the earth is something I have heard all my life, but is not an image I have tried to understand. I have heard people use the phrase “Salt of the Earth” as a description of a “good, honest, and humble person” but otherwise I can’t say I have thought too much about what it means to be the salt of the earth or to not lose my saltiness.

The familiarity of today’s Gospel reading is both good and bad. If there is a chapter of the Bible to be familiar with it is this one (The sermon on the mount is the sort of scripture to have written on our hearts - no doubt about it!!) However the familiarity can cause the words to wash over our ears.. we can feel as though we know it so well that we don’t have to study or meditate on it.

This week I began asking why does Jesus describe his followers as The Salt of the earth. What might that particular metaphor tell us about Jesus and about who we are in God’s kingdom? And I have come up with a bunch of possibilities, though I don’t think my list is exhaustive, I have learned this week that Salt is in fact fascinating.

First, especially in our modern context when we think of Salt we think of food. One of my favorite pastimes (or hobbies) is cooking; I'm not a chef by any measure, but I love cooking and baking. As an amateur cook I have learned that one of the most important things to get right in any recipe is the salt. Not enough, your food tastes terrible, too much and your food is inedible. Samin Nosrat, Chef and host of the Netflix Documentary Salt, Fat, Acid, Heat states:

Salt is fundamental to all good cooking; it enhances flavor, it even makes food taste more like itself... salt brings food to life. Learn to use it well and your food will taste great. In every corner of the world people use salt to season their food. It's one of the few elements that unites all cuisines...

I wonder if Jesus is telling his misfit crowd of followers, the overlooked, the persecuted, the struggling to survive people that they make this earth more enjoyable, they are the flavoring that unites all corners of the earth into one, that their presence makes the world more like itself. So, to be the Salt of the world, We are the flavor the world needs.

Another use of Salt is that it is used to preserve food. Long ago ancient Egyptians realized the preservation abilities of salt. It draws the bacteria-causing moisture out of foods, drying them and making it possible to store meat without refrigeration for extended periods of time. To this day, and especially in Jesus day, Salt is used as a method of preserving food. I wonder if Jesus is telling his followers and us to be the salt of this world means to be about preserving this world, to be about the work of slowing the decay that most human systems bring.

Salt is also used as medicine or a healing agent. In the same way that salt can be used to preserve food, Salt can also be used to heal certain wounds and illnesses. Saline Solution, which is very important to modern medicine, is essentially purified salt water. So, I wonder if Jesus is instructing his followers that as members of God's Kingdom, we are called to be healers of this earth.

I was also interested to learn this week that especially in Jesus' context (and in many ancient cultures) Salt was incredibly valuable. So valuable in fact that Salt was used as currency. Soldiers in the Roman army were sometimes paid with salt instead of money. Their monthly allowance was called "salarium" which eventually made it into the English language as the word "salary." I wonder if Jesus is telling his followers and us today that we are valuable - we are worth more than what the world says we are, that all members of the Kingdom of God are beloved and Holy children of God.

A preacher I follow states about this text:

"when I listen closely, I realize that nowhere in the Sermon On The Mount does Jesus say, "here are the conditions you must meet in order to be the salt of the Earth." He does not say "here are the standards of wholeness you must fulfill in order to be light for the world". No. He simply looks out into the crowd of people in pain, people who have been broken open – who bear those spiritual cracks that let in the light, who have the salt of sweat and tears on their

broken bodies, and says YOU are salt. You. You are light. You have that of God within you - the God whose light scatters the darkness. Your imperfect and beautiful bodies are made of chemicals with holiness shimmering in them...you are made of dirt and the very breath of God."

Another use of Salt is that it can be used to destroy. In fact, I was having coffee with a chemist this week and preparing for this sermon I asked her what she thought Jesus meant when he said "we are the salt of the earth" and she said that what immediately came to mind was the way in which salt can be used, especially on the earth as a way of destroying crops and the ground. I wonder if when Jesus says we are the salt of the earth Jesus also has in mind that the kingdom of God is here to destroy the systems of this world that oppress, and hurt, and destroy. I was reading from The Message Translation of the Bible this week, and I really was struck by its translation of our Isaiah Passage. I wonder if Jesus is saying when we are the Salt of The Earth:

We will break the chains of injustice,
get rid of exploitation in the workplace,
free the oppressed,
cancel debts.

Will we:

sharing your food with the hungry,
inviting the homeless poor into your homes,
putting clothes on the shivering ill-clad,

And Finally,

in many ancient civilizations used salt as a fertilizer for the soil, and depending on the conditions, it could help the earth retain water, make fields easier to plow, release minerals for plants, kill weeds, protect crops from disease, stimulate growth, and increase yields. That Jesus specifically describes his people as the salt of the earth, in a rural, farming culture is significant.

I wonder if Jesus is telling us that we are called to be fertilizers. We're meant to be in those places where conditions are challenging, and life is hard. We are sent to enrich the soil, kill weeds, protect against disease, and stimulate growth, and as we scatter, life springs up in unexpected places. Barren lands become fruitful.

I have learned this week is that to be called as the Salt of the Earth is a profound call that has many meanings. That we are called to be flavor, preservation, healers, that we are valuable. That we are called to destroy the evils of this world, and to fertilize God's kingdom around us. Let us take Jesus words seriously, that we are not to our Saltiness - it's the work is too important to loose that which makes us who we are.

Let us pray

Holy God, we are called to be your light, your salt, let us shine your light in the world transforming bringing all shadows into you kingdom... let us be the salt of the world.. In all its forms... small crystals that scatter and transform all we touch. In your name we pray. Amen.